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ABSTRACT

This study examined middle-school students' sociability self-concept and their perceptions of safety at school. A total of 421 students were administered anonymous questionnaires assessing perceived sociability self-concept and school safety. They were asked to rate their concern with, and exposure to, violence in four critical areas: use of physical force, being bullied, having property stolen, and being threatened with a weapon. Results indicated that students who reported more violent incidents occurring at school also tended to be more concerned about school violence. Statistical analysis of results shows that sociability appears to be a moderator variable, in that the effect of exposure on concern varied as a function of sociability. Overall, those students who had witnessed violence around them were inclined to report more concern, whereas those with less exposure were less concerned about the potential for school violence. Results suggest that building strength in sociability self-concept may benefit all students. Implementing supportive programs that include sociability self-concept may provide educational practitioners with an important strategy to enhance the resiliency of early adolescents. The report ends with 18 references and a table giving mean scores for adolescent concern about violence by exposure across levels of sociability. (RT)

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The Effect of Sociability Self-Concept On Adolescent Perceptions of Safety at School

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Abstract

This study examined middle school students' sociability self-concept and their perceptions of safety at school. Participants (N = 421) exposure to school violence, and concern about the potential for violence at school were measured across four critical areas; use of physical force, being bullied, having property stolen, and being threatened with a weapon. Results indicated that students who reported more violent incidents occurring at school also tended to be more concerned about school violence. As suggested by resiliency theory, sociability self-concept moderated the influence of exposure to violence on student concern. These findings are discussed relative to educational practice and resiliency theory.

The Effect of Sociability Self-Concept On Adolescent Perceptions of Safety at School

Early adolescence is recognized as a stressful time, during which youngsters are confronted with developmental changes, social role redefinition, and peer-group identification. One current theory for addressing adolescent stress is the resiliency model (Bernard, 1991; 1993). Resiliency theory operates when risk is present (Rutter, 1987), such as exposure to violence at school. Stress during early adolescence appears to be exacerbated by exposure to violence (Benton & Stabb, 1996). Thus educational practitioners might concentrate on those individual characteristics believed to facilitate resiliency. For example, students with low self-regard often lack the cognitive and motivational resources necessary to avoid violence (Egan & Perry, 1998). More specifically, social skill is one self-concept component consistently cited as a major coping resource that allows adolescents to adapt to threat and stress (Bogenschneider, 1996; Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Werner, 1990). Following Egan and Perry (1998), exposure to school violence should lead to concern about violence only to the extent that a youth has a low social self-concept.

Key findings from the (Kaufman, et al., 1999) *Indicators of School Crime and Safety* report from the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice indicate that students tend to feel less safe at school now than just a few years ago. This report, based upon a variety of independent data sources, identified types of violence considered to be serious to students

in the school environment. Being threatened with a weapon, involvement in fights, being bullied, and having property stolen are the areas of student violence cited as most critical in the report. The current study was designed to determine the relationship between adolescent exposure to school violence and concern about violence at school in these four critical areas.

Although urban youth are more likely than others to encounter violence (Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 1995), the experience of adolescent victimization is not exclusive to inner-city youth (Kuther & Fisher, 1998). Therefore, this study presents data based upon the responses of youth in a suburban setting where less is known about the prevalence and correlates of school violence. Further, the effect of exposure to school violence on concern about violence at school was assessed for students with differing levels of perceived sociability self-concept. Based on the resiliency model, it was hypothesized that sociability would moderate the influence of adolescent exposure to school violence on concern about violent incidents occurring at school.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Study participants included 6th or 7th graders, predominantly Euro-American and middle-class, attending one suburban mid-western public middle school. Participants were self-administered anonymous questionnaires assessing perceived sociability self-concept

and school safety by teachers during their regularly scheduled first-period class. In all, 421 (217 female, 204 male) of the 818 eligible middle-school students participated; the remaining students were denied parental permission to participate or were unavailable or unwilling to take part in the study.

Measures

The *School Safety Survey* (Mahaffey, 1995) includes items which ask students to rate their concern with, and exposure to violence in the four critical areas. All items were rated along 1 to 5 Likert-type scales, with Cronbach alpha coefficients (concern $\alpha = .81$; experience $\alpha = .71$) supporting the internal consistency reliability for these item sets. The "sociability" subscale from the *Multidimensional Test of Self-Concept* (Lathrop, 1988) asks students to respond to six items using 1 to 7 graphic rating scales. Internal consistency reliability, calculated with the middle-school data, was .74.

The cumulative frequency distribution of summed exposure scores was partitioned along naturally-occurring breaks to provide three groups; little (n=115), some (n=194), and much (n=112) exposure to violence. Similarly, students were also categorized into high (n=171), moderate (n=125), or low (n=125) sociability groups based upon their total self-concept score.

Results

Non-significant gender and grade differences in exposure to and concern about violence led to an assessment of the exposure-to-concern relationship using the full

adolescent sample (N = 421). Overall, students encountering more violence at school expressed higher levels of concern about the potential for school violence (r = .358; p < .001). Personal experience with violence explained about 13% of the variability in concern about violent incidents occurring at school. Correlation indices in the four critical areas all reached statistical significance (p<.001) where r = .177 (weapon), .214 (fights), .326 (both bullying and stealing).

Sociability appeared to be a moderator variable, in that the effect of exposure on concern varied as a function of sociability [F(4,412) = 4.78; p = .001]. As suggested by Winer (1971), the simple effect of exposure on concern was analyzed separately at each level of the moderator variable (see Table 1). These results suggested that, for the high sociability group, there were no significant differences in the amount of concern reported between any of the exposure groups. This was not the case, however, for those with either low [F (2, 412) = 5.48; p = .005] or moderate [F (2, 412) = 30.01; p < .001] sociability perceptions. Tukey comparisons tested for differences in the amount of concern between the three exposure groups for students reporting low or moderate sociability. These pair-wise mean comparisons yielded a similar pattern of results. For students reporting low or moderate sociability, those expressing much exposure to school violence (M=12.64 or 14.60, respectively) significantly differed in their concern from those reporting little (M=10.38 or 8.67) or some exposure (M=10.30 or 10.00). For both groups, there was no

real difference between the concern expressed by those with little or some exposure to school violence.

Discussion

Consistent with prior research (Kuther & Fisher, 1998) this adolescent sample tended to acknowledge the threat of violence in their suburban school. Further, student exposure to, and concern about school violence did not appear to vary by gender (Hinton-Nelson, Roberts, & Snyder, 1996). Although victimization has been related to grade level (Kaufman, 1999) the restricted age range in the current study may have limited the effect of age. Nevertheless, these findings may provide potentially useful insights into the perceived school safety among middle-class, suburban early adolescents.

Overall, those who had witnessed violence around them were inclined to report more concern while those with less exposure were less concerned about the potential for school violence. Given that adolescent risk behaviors tend to cluster (St. George & Thomas, 1997), it was not surprising that personal experience helped to explain some of the variability in expressed concern with violence across all four critical areas. The exposure-to-concern relationships noted here augment findings which indicate an association between exposure to violence and school functioning (Bowen & Bowen, 1999). Evidently exposure not only appears to affect behaviors such as academic performance (Cooley-Quille, Turner, & Beidel, 1995) but also general emotional states (Hinton-Nelson,

Roberts, & Snyder, 1996) and perhaps more specific areas of emotionality , such as concern about violence at school.

The effect of exposure on concern appeared to be conditioned by perceived sociability self-concept. Social competence is a well-documented protective mechanism (Bogenschneider, 1996). Taken together, the results presented here tend to support the resiliency model. As expected, among low-sociability adolescents, those with high levels of exposure to violence reported more concern than did those with less exposure. Accordingly, these low-sociability adolescents may not have been afforded the protection necessary to maintain resiliency in the face of increased exposure to school violence. The moderate-sociability adolescents reacted to school violence in a similar way, with exposure maintaining its influence on adolescent concern about violent incidents occurring at school. It is notable that adolescents with high sociability perceptions appeared to be somewhat protected, in that exposure was less influential in students' reported concern. This interpretation is supported by Egan and Perry (1998) who found that self-perceived peer social competence consistently moderated the relationship of behavior risk variables to victimization.

In summary, the results from this study draw attention to a component that may be incorporated into school violence prevention programs. As a strategy, building strength in sociability self-concept may benefit all students, such as well-functioning suburban and high-risk inner-city youth. This would then eliminate the need for school personnel to

identify or potentially stigmatize adolescents with high levels of exposure to school violence. Well-developed social and interpersonal skills are considered to be proximal processes that are amenable to intervention (Bogenschneider, 1996). Implementing supportive programs that include sociability self-concept may provide educational practitioners with an important strategy to enhance the resiliency of early adolescents.

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Table 1. Adolescent Concern About Violence Mean Scores by Exposure Across the Levels of Sociability (N = 421)

		Student Exposure to School Violence		
		Little (n=115)	Some (n=194)	Much (n=112)
Sociability Self-Concept	Low (n=125)	10.38	10.30	12.64
	Average (n=125)	8.67	10.00	14.60
	High (n=171)	10.18	10.14	11.53